

## **SOUTH AFRICAN RADIO AND TELEVISION AS CONTEXTS FOR EXEGESIS:**

### **A case-study of interpretive practices in South African public worship<sup>1</sup>**

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1. Religion - especially the Christian religion - has played, and still plays, an extremely important role in the structuring of public life in South Africa (78% of the population regard themselves as Christian; cf the decisive role Afrikaner churches played in the legitimization of *apartheid* as well as the role played by religion in the struggle against *apartheid*, HSRC Report 1985; Church and Society 1991; Kairos Document, The road to Damascus; Evangelical Witness in South Africa; Relevant pentecostal witness.) This social role has obviously been ambivalent: religion either served to perpetuate the socio-political *status quo* by at least inhibiting, if not opposing, any process of change; or it acted as vanguard in the liberating and democratising process (De Gruchy 1979; Villa-Vicencio 1991). The religious witness was therefore also ambivalent: it acted simultaneously as both a unifying and as a conflict-generating force (Adonis and Smit 1991; Villa-Vicencio 1987; Nolan 1988; The things that make for peace).

2. Until now, in this allegedly 'Christian' society of South Africa, high priority has been given to religious programmes of semi-state-owned South African Broadcasting Corporation. Religious broadcasting has been an integral and crucial part of the broadcasting programme from its inception. 'Public worship' was regarded as of prime importance in the structuring of public life. In 1989 nearly 10% of the total broadcasting programme schedule was devoted to religious programmes - at no cost at all to the broadcasting churches. An interdenominational Advisory Board, consisting of representatives of all the mainline Churches in South Africa, advises the Directorate of Religion of the SABC on practical matters, such as the allocation of broadcasting times, etc. This Directorate is responsible for the policy and the pro-

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1. Paper read at the meeting of the Society of Biblical Language, Kansas City, U S A, November 1991.

duction of religious programmes. Representatives on the Directorate, and all the religious producers of the Afrikaans programmes are all ordained ministers of one of the Reformed Churches. The SABC TV has two channels: one for 'whites' with Afrikaans and English programmes; and one for 'blacks' in different ethnic languages. Recently a private Christian Broadcasting Company, sponsored by so-called evangelical groups and institutions, has also been created. They buy broadcasting time for their programmes from the SABC.

It is hard to overestimate the social role of the public media in any country. It tells the story of who we are, who has power, who is making news, what is of value, etc. The media, as expressions of public culture, thus reflects what is happening in society, its problems, its hopes and its fears. But at the same time it also helps to shape society, by supplying it with new ideas, new heroes and new symbolic universes. Where does the public worship of the Church fit into this social role?

3. Preaching is always a social act (cf Van Seters *et al* 1988). Preaching is done by human beings and is heard and understood by human beings, each living in a specific society and culture. Thus all preaching is a corporate activity with major social implications. This is true whether the preaching takes place in the worship of churches on Sundays, or in this particular case, in public worship during religious broadcasting.

4. The Bible occupies an extremely important and central place in public worship in South Africa. In a recent research project into the content and style of the SABC's Afrikaans religious programmes we were interested *inter alia* in this role which the Bible plays in 'public worship'. (The story of this research has been told elsewhere. See HSRC Müller's 1989 Report; Müller & Smit 1991a; Müller & Smit 1991b; Müller & Smit 1992). The results made it obvious that the Bible itself was indeed intended to play an important and crucial role:

\* In 75% of the sample the Bible was clearly the formal basis of the content. Close to 50% of all the programmes started with the biblical text and proceeded from there in a deductive pattern of logic. The exposition and application of a biblical text, which was read as an authoritative word, thus formed the basic format of the programmes.

\* This biblical basis was demonstrated even more vividly when the presupposed authority of the proclamation was analysed. At least 85% of the programmes were based on a direct appeal to a specific text and therefore could be regarded as miniature expository sermons. The preachers thus expected the listeners/viewers to believe what they said, because they only said what the Bible says.

\* Our conclusion: Afrikaans religious programmes as expressions of the Afrikaans public worship, were based, at least formally, on the external authority of the Bible, and, in most cases, on a specific text. The way the

preachers understood themselves, their roles and their claims is well-defined by Boone's recent description of fundamentalist discourse: the Bible tells them so (Boone 1990). This correlates with the findings of Horsfield (1984) and Fore (1987) in connection with the private religious programmes in the USA.

5. Despite the important role which radio and television have played in the formation of public life, its ethos and culture (cf the works of Gerbner, Fore, Horsfield), there has only been a relatively small amount of research conducted on radio and television religious programmes in South Africa, Western Europe and even in America (see Müller's HSRC Report 1989; also Fore 1987 and Horsfield 1984). This lack meant that our research project on 'Tendencies in Afrikaans Religious programmes of the SABC' had to move into an unknown and uncharted field of research. Our main focus in that project was not so much to determine the actual effect of these programmes. Rather, we were more eager to determine, by means of a rhetorical analysis of these programmes, their focus and the way they function as public media, i. e. as public rhetorical phenomena. With regard to the role of the Bible in these programmes, our main interest lay in understanding and describing the interpretive practices employed in dealing with biblical texts as part of a religious discourse. In this paper we therefore present some of our findings not as a final analysis, but as part of on-going research into the questions: how do texts work in these programmes?; how do these interpretations work when intended for public consumption?; and what do we do with these interpretations, especially when they have to operate in the context of public media and public issues?

This paper is thus merely a case study which we present in order to learn, from a larger community of theologians and researchers working with texts, how to develop a media hermeneutic. Such a hermeneutic should aim at the overlapping of two horizons: that of the biblical text and that of public reality. In other words: where and how do these two stories - that of the public pulpit and the public square - meet?

6. It could be of interest if we present some of the findings of this research project in the form of answers to the questions put by rhetorical analysis: who reads/interprets which 'Bible', to 'whom', in whose interest, and with what social effect? (cf Wuellner 1989, Jsseling 1988, Eagleton 1983). We believe that answers to these questions will point to the way texts and interpretations work (or do not work) in the discourse of the public marketplace.

### 6.1 Who are the preachers?

The following profile emerged of who the 'preachers' (i.e. the people conducting the devotions and services) were: they were mainly white, male, higher middle class, between 35 and 50 years of age.

\* There was a total absence of black ministers conducting services. Black viewers are not even reflected in the statistics supplied by the SABC. It would seem that the Corporation assumed that these viewers, being black, would not listen to/view Afrikaans religious programmes. We have data contradicting this assumption. 'Coloured' ministers (so described by the now repealed South African law on race classification) formed a meagre 5.5%, a figure which is totally disproportionate to the number of 'Coloured' viewers/listeners (cf Table 1).

\* Despite the fact that 50% of the viewers were female, no woman were allowed to present a religious programme (cf Table 2).

\* 75% of the preachers were between 35 and 50 years of age (cf Table 3). Their 'projected image' (dress, furniture, studio background, etc.) represents the higher middle-class in South Africa which is only a small portion of the population, most of whom have Third World lifestyles and standards of living.

In our opinion this composition of preachers has had a devastating social effect for three reasons:

\* The fact that the majority of preachers were white meant that the culture of *apartheid*, as it existed in 1987, was reinforced in the presentation of programmes claiming the authority of the Bible. Existing social, political and racial distinctions in society were in no way transcended by the unifying and reconciling powers inherent in the Christian religion.

\* The fact that these programmes projected a middle-class profile confirmed an impression that the biblical message was the sole property of the middle-class, and thus foreign to other social strata.

\* The fact that no female was allowed to present a programme perpetuated the idea that only males have the right, authority and competence to proclaim the 'words of God'.

These perceptions which the media have connected to the public message of the Bible have far reaching implications for both church and society.

## 6. Which Bible?

Our research suggests that these programmes have as their point of departure the self-confident assertion that their authority lies in the fact that 'the Bible tells them so'. If this is indeed the case, then the following questions need consideration: which Bible? What does this Bible say? How is this Bible 'constructed' by this particular community of interpretation?

\* The main texts used were: Psalms (11%), Proverbs (5%), Gospels (25%), Pauline Letters (26%). Where Old Testament texts were used, these were mostly pastoral: very few prophetic texts were chosen (cf Table 4). This area requires more specific research.

\* We discovered that very rarely was authority based on scientific exegesis or theological arguments, but rather on what Lange calls the 'sacramentalistic authority' of the text (1976; see also Moller 1983 on Luther). Thus, the answer to the question of 'which' Bible would be the Bible *an sich*, 'as it is written in the Book'. This claim is reinforced on nearly all religious television programmes screened by the SABC, by a visual image of the Bible. Underlying this image is the assertion that this Bible embodies such a *claritas* of its own that it is in no need of profound exegetical exposition (cf Table 6).

\* An examination of the spectrum of doctrinal issues inherent in these 'messages' answered the question of 'which' Bible with even greater clarity. In order to ascertain the doctrinal content of these programmes we used a detailed list of 79 traditional doctrinal categories. There was evidence only of those categories which dealt with the *intra nos*, the inner experience of individual religion including those dealing with some spiritual attitudes (e.g. new life, commitment, personal appropriation of faith, sanctification and a life of prayer and love). No attempt at all was made to deal with the issues of Church and society. Nor did the programmes deal in any meaningful way with God's creation, God's providence in history; the person and work of Christ, His life, and miracles; the person and work of the Spirit; election; reconciliation; the Church and its confession; the sacraments; or eschatology (cf Table 7). Indisputably, very little is said about the classical doctrinal truths, especially those of the objective *extra nos*. In terms of the doctrine of classical Christianity, the theological content has obviously been narrowed down to a large extent.

\* We tried to analyse the ethical content of these programmes in three ways. Firstly, in order to classify the ethical thrust of the programmes, we used a list of general ethical categories. More than 75% of the programmes had no ethical content at all. The only category worth mentioning were those programmes which dealt with love (13%), but in most cases love was understood in an individualistic and vertical sense. There was no attempt at all to deal with the ethical issues of charity, justice, and human dignity, etc (cf Table 8.1). Secondly, in order to classify moral topics, we drew from the Decalogue a list of categories which dealt with moral issues. In this analysis, 91% of the programmes made no reference whatsoever to these issues (cf Table 8.2). Thirdly, to gain another perspective, a research group in the Department of Journalism, University of Stellenbosch, developed a list of the ethical issues which were in the forefront of public media during that time. From this list of burning issues, all reflecting the dominant culture of the time, only one issue - poverty - was mentioned in more than 1% of the programmes (cf Table 8.3). 95% of the programmes made no reference at all to any of these topics.

\* The overall picture is clear. Complete separation existed within the public worship of the SABC's Afrikaans religious programmes from those issues dealing with church and society, faith and morals, and doctrine and ethics.



Thus public worship was directed solely at 'religious individuals', who possessed inner-religious needs only, and who lived without recognition of the interaction between church and society. Such separation meant that the worship contained in these programmes celebrated a story almost totally unrelated to the story of the Christian church, and unrelated as well to the story of the particular society in which the listeners and viewers lived.

\* Thus, the answer to the question of 'which Bible' is that this Bible was not the 'whole Bible', but a construct of the Bible. An abbreviated, condensed Bible which dealt in a very selective way with the subjective, private and personal side of religious experience. The social effect is once again clear. Such a Bible would cause no offense to anyone: it did not deal with any public issue, but only with a general religiosity or with those undisputed aspects of doctrine or life. In reality this was a 'sectarian' Bible, which remained silent in terms of the doctrines of salvation, human dignity, social justice, economic greed and the misuse of political power.

### 6.3 To whom?

Just as the Bible had been reduced, so was the intended audience likewise reduced. These programmes were clearly addressed only to the religious. This target audience was further reduced by the fact that although the programmes were formally addressed to religious people belonging to a congregation (Table 9), an analysis of their content revealed that in reality they were addressed to religious individuals. In no way were the programmes addressed to unbelievers; the poor or the rich; the suffering; the unemployed; the people holding positions of political power or those deprived of such power. Thus the target audience became the religious public in a very general sense of the word, a public consisting of a collection of religious individuals, who had a need for a personal religion, or a religion which was not concerned with the affairs of this world. There was very little dialogue, if any, with the other world religions which have followings in South Africa. Neither was there any polemic with unbelief. Nor was there any message of hope for, or compassion with, the poor, the socially marginalized or the addict. None of the issues facing these groups seem to be represented at all in the audience addressed by the media.

A list of categories was drawn up to isolate the root causes which underlay many problems which the public encountered in their daily life. These problems, such as old age, suffering, poverty, unemployment, conflict on different social levels, political injustice or insecurity, were all inherent in the South African society of the day. As such they should have been reflected or addressed in these religious programmes. But in actual fact, they were not regarded as target problems at all (Table 10). Rather, the root cause of all the fear, anxiety, insecurity, sense of hopelessness, even loss of the meaning of life - all so clearly manifested in society - was supposed to be a lack of individual religion. The remedy applied was thus: give the public more religion.

#### 6.4 With what purpose?

The rhetorical purpose of the programmes became very clear. It is not surprising that 72% of the programmes were aimed at enlisting the audience, appealing, and trying to convince them (Table 11). What was the aim of this appeal? To become more religious. Audiences were asked repeatedly to repent and to commit themselves personally to the responsibilities of a Christian daily life. But this daily life was one which was devoid of the necessity to change any behaviour or value system, or to take any socio-political stance or action in society. At most this was a life of changed attitudes, but one which operates again mostly on the individual level (cf Table 11). In short: this was an appeal which had no real ethical impact. Religion was completely privatized in the process: the need for salvation was advocated as the cure to all the ailments facing the individual. A change of heart and, maybe, a change of attitudes would change the world. It would seem that the real need lay outside the concern of this public proclamation to religious people: the need to change those structures which bedevil society and which form the root cause of many social ills and public problems. But in the programmes it actually seemed as if these problems were avoided at all costs, probably because of the very fact that they were contentious public issues. Hence the fear that any effort to address these issues would create a public 'disturbance'. The public proclamation was clearly not intended to disturb but to soothe.

#### 6.5 In whose interest?

Superficially the programmes seemed to be in the interests of public religion in society. In fact they were directed at the formation and encouragement of a general, individualistic religiosity which was based on a renewed, reconciled, but private relationship with God. It would seem that this emphasis indicated to the public broadcasters the need for a very necessary return to the basics of faith, to the unique 'no other gospel' during times of uncertainty and division in the Afrikaner public. In no way did they want to become, either consciously or deliberately, involved socially, or to be used as tools by any ideology. Neither did they want to become engaged in any ecumenical discussion or in a missionary dialogue with other faiths or world views. Public religion had been privatized, at least as far as the public media was concerned. This left the symbolic public square of South African society exposed. At the same time it shifted the sphere of the church from this public square to the sacred ghetto of individual life. This shift dealt a serious blow to the public relevancy of the church and its message. In this process the Church remained silent in its public proclamation. This silence can be interpreted as a complete adaptation to the dominant culture and social practices of society: a total and uncritical surrender to the very essence of secularization.

### 6.6 With what effect?

We did not do an impact analysis of real audience reception. Nevertheless, we can conclude the following concerning the general effect of Afrikaans religious programmes:

In 1987 South Africa suffered the hey-day of *apartheid*: state security measures, violence, unrest, oppression, growing poverty and social disintegration affected the lives of many of its inhabitants. South Africa also suffered the silence of the Bible in many churches. As we have already indicated, these churches suffered the impoverishment of narrowed-down interpretative practices in its public proclamation. This had disastrous effects on both the public sphere and on the Church. Its lack of public witness left the public sphere, deeply in need of spiritual and moral guidance, exposed and without spiritual counsel.

### 7. In conclusion

This is the way in which texts are interpreted in public proclamation in South Africa.

A comparison of our results with those of Fore (1987), Gerbner *et al* (1984), Horsfield (1984) and research in Europe seems to indicate the same tendencies. They point to a phenomenon which needs the attention not only of international theological research, but also of ecumenical Christianity.



# APPENDIX: TABULATED DATA OF ANALYSIS

**TABLE 1: RACE**

PREACHERS			%	REAL AUDIENCE			%
TV	White		95	TV	White		65
	Coloured		5		Coloured		35
	Black		0		Black		?
Radio	White		94	Radio	White		53
	Coloured		6		Coloured		47
	Black		0		Black		?

**TABLE 2: SEX**

PREACHERS			%	REAL AUDIENCE			%
TV	Male		100	TV	Male		48
	Female		0		Female		52
Radio	Male		100	Radio	Male		45
	Female		0		Female		55

**TABLE 3: AGE**

AGE	PREACHERS %	AUDIENCE %
16-24	0	20
25-34	8	21
35-49	81	24
50 <sup>+</sup>	11	35

**TABLE 4: TEXT USED**

Pentateuch	8	Romans	5
Jos-Esther	8	1 & 2 Cor	7
Job	3	Gal	9
Psalms	20	Eph-Col	23
Prov	9	Thes-Philemon	3
Eccl & Songs	4	Hebr	4
Prophets	11	James	4
Mt	15	Peter-John	7
Mk	1	Rev	1
Lk	10	No text used	4
John	20		

TABLE 5.1: MODE OF INTRODUCTION

TYPE OF INTRODUCTION	DEVOTIONS		SERVICES	
	TV %	RADIO %	TV %	RADIO %
Statement	39	47	6.2	7.6
Text	13	26	44	12
General Context	11	10	13	38
Question	17	12	13	12
Personal Witness	4	0	6.2	0
Story	7	0	0	12
Not identifiable	9	5	17.6	18.4

TABLE 5.2: BASIS OF ARGUMENT

BASED UPON	DEVOTIONAL		SERVICES	
	TV %	RADIO %	TV %	RADIO %
Text / Verses	86	47	25	12
Pericope	7.0	24	69	73
Series of texts		5.9	0	7.7
Topic	1.4	15	6.2	3.8
Not identifiable	5.6	8.1	-	3.5

TABLE 6.1: SUPPOSED AUTHORITY OF THE PROGRAMMES

	DEVOTION		WORSHIP	
	TV %	RADIO %	TV %	RADIO %
Holy Scripture in general	14	0	6.2	3.8
Holy Scripture specific text	86	93	94	85
Scientific exegesis	0	0	0	0
Knowledge of preacher	0	0	0	3.8
Sincerity of preacher	0	0	0	0
Experience of preacher	0	0	0	3.8

**TABLE 6.2: HOW WAS THE SCRIPTURE USED**

USE	DEVOTIONS		SERVICES	
	TV %	RADIO %	TV %	RADIO %
No Scriptural reference	2.8	3.0	0	0
Scr. used in general				
without exposition	2.8	1.5	6.2	0
A specific text quoted	2.8	2.2	6.2	0
A specific text with exposition	89	74	88	85
A group of texts simply quoted	2.8	0	0	0
Text explained with help of other texts	0	0	0	15

**TABLE 6.3: EXEGETICAL METHODS USED, IF ANY**

METHOD	DEVOTIONS		SERVICES	
	TV %	RADIO %	TV %	RADIO %
On face value of text	46	28	31	38
Concordance used	1.4	2.9	6.2	0
Grammatical	35	49	56	42
Socio-historic	1.4	0	0	3.8
Existentialistic	1.4	1.5	0	0
Other	4.2	5.9	6.2	11
None	8.5	13	0	0
Historic-literary	0	2.9	0	3.8

TABLE 7: DOCTRINAL CONTENT

CONTENT	DEVOTIONS		SERVICES	
	TV %	RADIO %	TV %	RADIO %
God, creation	4.2	10.0	6.2	3.8
Sin	1.4	0	6.2	0
Work of Christ	4.2	7.4	0	0
Work of Holy Spirit	8.4	7.4	13	7.7
Appropriation of faith	5.6	5.4	6.2	7.7
Conversion	2.8	4.4	13	0
Personal faith	2.8	5.4	6.2	7.7
Assurance of redemption	2.8	2.9	6.2	3.8
Sanctification in general	5.6	5.9	0	7.7
Commitment	19.0	21.5	19.0	20.4
Law as gratitude	0	0	6.2	0
Prayer life	5.6	4.4	6.2	0
Love	13	7.4	6.2	13.8
The Church	2.8	4.4	6.2	13.8
Means of Grace	0	0	0	0
Hope	5.6	0	0	0
Eschatology	0	1.4	0	0
No doctrinal content	16.2	12	0	13.8
	65.6	64.8	82.2	68.8

**TABLE 8: ETHICAL CONTENT IN TERMS OF**

BASIC CONCEPTS	%	THEOLOGICAL ETHICS	%	BASIC CONTEMPORARY ISSUES	%
Love	13	Idolatry, false gods, satanism	0	General violence, murder, crime	1.1
Reconciliation	2.7	Abuse of Name of Lord	0.5	Human rights in general	0.5
Peace	1.6	Prayer	0	Detainment, political trials	0
Charity, solidarity	1.6	Honouring Lord's Day	0	Press control	0
Justice	0	Obedience to parents	1.1	Military force, violence, governmental action	0
Human dignity	2.7	Obedience to authority, truth, rule of law, civil (dis)obedience	0	Right to rebellion, riots	0
Forgiveness	1.6	Respect for life, murder, euthanasia, abortion	0	Group areas	0
Forbearance	1.1	Sex as gift, misuse	0	Discrimination, eg. in education, medical treatment, wages, etc.	0
Other	12.1	Marriage, adultery	3.8	Labour relations, etc.	0.5
None	63.5	Property	1.1	Poverty, housing	1.1
		Labour, Employment	1.1	Unemployment	0.5
		Peace and War	1.1	Sexual abuse	1.1
		Political power, abuse or lack of power	0	Drug abuse, alcohol	0.5
		Relationship church/state	0	Environmental control, ecology	0
		Other	22.6	Other	28.4
		No identifiable ethical content	68.7	None	66.4

**TABLE 9: TARGET AUDIENCE**

	DEVOTIONAL		SERVICES	
	TV	RADIO	TV	RADIO
Congregation	39	44	75	62
General Public	28	12	0	1
Religious People	13	36	10	30
Unbelievers	1	0	13	0
Not identifiable	19	8	2	7

**TABLE 10: PRESUPPOSED PROBLEMS A TARGET AUDIENCE HAS TO COPE WITH**

	%
Old Age	0.5
Illness	0.5
Death	1.0
Suffering	2.3
Poverty	0
Unemployment	0
Financial problems	0.5
Tension	1.0
Conflict	2.3
Political injustice, oppression	0.5
Political menace, insecurity, unrest	1.0
Religious Problems	90.4

**TABLE 11: THE INTENDED EFFECT AND CORRESPONDING EMPHASIS**

INTENDED EFFECT	%	EFFECT ELICITED BY EMPHASIS ON	%
Pastoral Consolation	13.8	The role of christian life	19.8
Teach a truth	8.8	Personal commitment, piety,	17.7
Enlist canvass, appeal, incite, convince	71.8	discipleship	
Sociocritique, confront, protest, rebel	0	Conversion	20.4
Other	5.6	Prayer and Bible study	8.3
		Witnessing	0.5
		Developing new attitudes	11.1
		Developing points of view	1.7
		New behaviour, conduct in general	17.2
		New values	1.7
		New social and political conduct	1.1
		Better human relations	7.7
		Other	2.8